PURSUED, FOUND, AND KEPT
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Psalm 139:1–12
Romans 8:31–39
Genesis 28:10–22

"Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go,
and will bring you back to this land;
for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."
Genesis 28:15 (NRSV)

Lord
I shall be
verie busie
this day. I
may forget
Thee but doe
not Thou
forget me.

Sir Jacob Astley
"Prayer before the Battle of Edge Hill, 1643"

Everyone should have a favorite prayer: a short verse or two tucked away and available for use at a moment's notice. It should be a simple prayer with an uncomplicated but important message. Anne Lamott has two favorites: "Help me, help me, help me" in the morning, and "Thank you, thank you, thank you" at night before sleep. She added a third recently, a one-word prayer: "Wow."

Here's one of my favorite prayers:

Lord
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Thee but doe
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forget me.

I don’t even know where I found it. But I wrote it down and kept it and have used it on many occasions, and it still serves as my favorite, all-purpose prayer. It reflects a hope and articulates a theological vision that is at the very heart of our faith: that there is nowhere we can go or nothing that can happen to us that will separate us from God. It is also reflective of the Abrahamic tradition shared by Jews, Muslims, and Christians.

We’ve been thinking together recently about some of the oldest, most familiar, and best stories in the Bible, prompted by a *Tribune* editorial lamenting the woeful lack of basic biblical knowledge. People don’t know much about the Bible: the characters, the stories, the plots. We are forgetting our precious, formative stories, the paper asserted.

And so a summer sermon series based on some of the basic, formative stories of the Abrahamic tradition—Bible stories everyone should know.

> Noah: the flood, the ark, the rainbow and the covenant, the promise of God to never abandon creation, a promise to very living creature
>
> Abraham and Sarah, called by God in their old age to pick up and move, and God’s promise to bless them and to make them a blessing to others
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> The Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac story: Abraham’s wife, Sarah, offers her maid, Hagar, to Abraham because Sarah is childless. A son is born, Ishmael. And then Sarah conceives, has a son, Isaac. Things do not go well. Hagar and Ishmael are banished to the wilderness where they nearly die. God hears the baby cry and intercedes: Ishmael and Hagar proceed to Egypt and the other Abrahamic faith, Islam, has its progenitor, Abraham’s other son. God’s love and mercy is for all.

This morning, Jacob, one of the most fascinating and morally ambiguous characters in the Bible, and his dream, familiar to many through an old Sunday School and summer camp song, “We are climbing Jacob’s ladder.”

After Hagar and Ishmael depart, Isaac thrives, grows, survives a close call at Mt. Moriah, where his father, Abraham, nearly kills him—that’s another story. Isaac grows to adulthood, meets lovely Rebekah, falls in love in a very romantic story—and, by the way, love between parents and children, women and men, plays an unusually important role in these ancient stories at a time when human love was not generally even acknowledged as a reality; people married and had children for reasons of survival, not love.

Isaac and Rebekah fall in love, marry, have children—twin boys, in fact: Esau and Jacob. Esau is the firstborn son, with rights of inheritance. Esau is by far the more attractive of the boys, an outdoorsman, a hunter, his father Isaac's favorite. Jacob, the story says, is a quiet man who stays home in the tent, his mother's favorite. He is also very smart. He and his mother turn out to be among the best schemers and manipulators in history.

One day Esau comes home from a hard day of hunting, tired, famished, and discovers his brother, Jacob, making a stew. It smells delicious. "What do I have to do to get a bowl of that stew?" he asks Jacob. And Jacob says, "Your birthright—your right of inheritance and our father's blessing." For some reason Esau agrees. I guess I've been that hungry. In any event, Esau lets his stomach think for him and now has given away his precious right to inherit the property when Isaac dies.

What comes next is worse. Isaac is near the end of his life; he's old, doesn't get around much, is nearly blind. It's time to do the blessing that will confer inheritance rights on his eldest son, so Isaac plans a little celebration. He tells Esau to go hunting and make him his favorite stew and they will sit down and eat and drink together and the blessing will be conveyed.

Rebekah and Jacob thereupon pull off one of the most appalling scams imaginable. While Esau is hunting, she prepares the stew. She concocts an elaborate disguise for Jacob so that he will appear to be Esau—Isaac is not seeing so well any longer—even arranges for Jacob to feel and smell like Esau. The old man is uneasy when Jacob, disguised as Esau, comes in with the food. But it works. Jacob receives the blessing that was intended for Esau.

In the meantime Esau returns, makes the stew, comes to his father, and learns that the blessing has already been given. It is irrevocable. It cannot be undone. "Esau hated his brother," the story says, which is certainly an understatement. In fact, he says out loud for everyone to hear, "The day our father dies I am going to kill my brother." It is a threat to be taken very seriously.

Again Rebekah intercedes, arranges a getaway for Jacob, and Jacob leaves, literally fleeing for his life. That's the situation, and you really have to know all that to understand the rest.

Jacob is on the run, banished from his home and family as a result of his own deception and deceit.

Banishment from the tribe or clan is about the worst thing that can happen to a man. It is a virtual death sentence. Besides, Jacob is terrified that his brother may be following him. He's out in the wilderness, utterly alone. And

he has to be feeling guilty. He's made this mess for himself. When the sun goes down on the first day of his journey, he lies down, with a stone for a pillow, falls asleep, and has a dream. That dream—subject of the camp song—is about a ladder, or ramp, with angels descending and ascending, and Jacob hears the voice: the voice that came to his father and grandfather and grandmother.

> "Behold, I am with you, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you."

The ancient world paid a lot of attention to dreams as a means of revelation and insight. There is a lot of dreaming in the Bible: Jacob, Joseph, Daniel have important dreams as do the wise men, Pilate's wife, and Peter. In Christian history, Constantine and Ignatius Loyola have life-changing dreams, and Martin Niemöller, one of the great courageous clergy heroes of Second World War Germany, decided to publicly oppose Adolf Hitler on the basis of a dream.

Interestingly, neuroscience is paying renewed attention to dreams these days and has discovered that we are "wired to dream," that it is a natural part of the sleep cycle, and that we do dream each and every night (see the *Christian Century*, 28 June 2005).

Psychology and psychiatry have always paid more attention to dreams than most of us do or want to do.

Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann observes,

> We children of the Enlightenment do not regularly linger over such illusive experiences as dreams. We seek to "enlighten" what is before us and to overcome the inscrutable and eerie in order to make the world more manageable. We do well in management while we are awake, and we keep the light and power on 24/7.
>
> Except, of course, that we must sleep. We require sessions of rest and thus of vulnerability. Dreams address us. They invite us beyond our management. (*Christian Century*, 28 June 2005)

This first dream in the Bible is important. It comes at a critical and very human moment. And it says first that this God of ours is not particularly predictable, refuses to be confined to human ideas and expectations, behaves in ways that are not always reasonable and rational. Who would expect God to come out there in the wilderness, Jacob running for his life? God comes not to a holy place, a sacred altar, a sanctuary; God comes to the place where Jacob is.

That's an important point, a notion at the heart of our faith, a radical idea actually. For the entire sweep of human history, the prevailing assumption has been that it is part of the human experience and responsibility to seek for God. That's what religion is: the organized attempt to pursue and to find and to be in touch with God, the holy, the other, the ultimate. And so human beings have created behavior designed to access God: rituals, liturgies, duties, disciplines, self-mortification, sacrifice. We have built structures for God to occupy, tabernacles and temples, mosques and basilicas, beautiful cathedrals. We have written beautifully and profoundly about God. The human search for the ultimate has been our magnificent obsession, and it has inspired the most sublime art, music, and architecture we have ever created. And along the way religion becomes a little too sure of itself, a little too certain that it knows exactly the heart and mind of God, even God's political preferences. Some religion is so certain it knows the heart of God, it is willing to commit suicide and kill innocent people.

Joan Chittister, a Benedictine sister and best-selling author writes, "We can't bear mystery, we can't abide the beneficence of the unknown. We 'define' the nature of God. We dogmatize the unknown and we excommunicate people who dare to wonder" (*Called to Question*, p. 37).

This ancient story, so full of mystery and the unknown, the unpredictability of God, invites us to stop our incessant ritualizing and dogmatizing and simply allow some space for God's initiatives. This story invites us to stop asking and start pondering the mystery of the one God who chooses to love every living creature, the unpredictable God who appears in the middle of human life at its most human.

Psalm 139, the Psalter reading for the day, is a prayer: "Lord, you have searched me and known me." It doesn't ask anything, simply ponders the mysterious presence of God.

That's first. God comes into the world not where we expect God, not only where we build buildings and gather in them—although Jesus did promise that where two or three gather in his name, he will be in their midst, an experience we share regularly in worship. But that isn't the end of it. That is not the only place God comes—to our religious buildings, structures, rituals, or even our theologies, our religion. God comes when and where God chooses, and the word here is that everything we do and say that might fall under the definition of religion is not an end in itself but a symbol, a sign, a pointer to God's mystery and majesty and God's coming into the world and our lives in ways that are not always predictable.

Second, God comes into the world at its most worldly; comes to a fugitive on the run from his own misdeeds and guilt, out in the wilderness with his head on a stone pillow. God comes into the world, and so God's church must

never forget that. God cares about and is present in Cabrini-Green as well as the Gothic sanctuary of Fourth Presbyterian Church. God cares about this enterprise and God cares about how life is lived over there. Our plans and programs are important to God and so is the Chicago Housing Authority Plan for Transformation that intends to bring better housing, social services, education, and a better, freer, more hopeful life to people who have become captives of poverty.

That is a basic thrust of biblical faith: “I am with you . . . in the world. The world is my focus.” And centuries later, one would come whom we believe was God’s own Son, the incarnation of God’s love and power and grace and mercy, one called Emmanuel, God with us.

God comes to us not just when we are sitting in our pew in church or saying our prayers. God comes to us in our humanness: where we are most human, which means in our frailties and weaknesses, in our doubts, in anxieties and fears, in our hopes and our dreams. God comes to us in our disappointments, our failure to be as good and strong and honest as we want to be. God comes to us in our guilt, our betrayals and deceits, as God came to Jacob.

Jacob’s humanity is there for all to see. Brueggemann observes that Jacob’s wakeful world was a world of terror, loneliness, and guilt.

What Jacob did was despicable, an appalling betrayal that produced the predictable experience of isolation, banishment, and loneliness. But even his guilt did not separate him from God or keep God from finding him in the night with the promise of newness and possibility. “I will be with you and keep you and bring you home.”

Is there any better news than that? There is nothing we have done or can do that will keep God from coming to us with the promise of forgiveness, restoration, homecoming. It is, Brueggemann says, the gospel, “the full complement of Good News.” God is with us. God will keep us. God will bring us home.

Jacob was running for his life, terrified when he laid his head on that stone and tried to fall asleep. And I couldn’t help but think about how accustomed we have come to be with the word *terror,* how obsessed we are. Terrorist, terrorism, terrorist attacks, war on terror, victims of terror, 3,000 Americans on 9/11, hundreds in Iraq every week, 27 children last week, Londoners in subways and buses on their way to work. I found myself praying all week: prayers of intercession for victims and dear ones; prayers of gratitude for the way our British neighbors have, once again, simply refused to allow terror any authority or power to determine how life is lived.

I don’t suppose we will be free of it for a long time, if ever. And one of the deepest, most profound resources of our faith is the promise that God is with us and will keep us forever.

For our part, we do forget. It was another Jacob who prayed 400 years ago:

> Lord
> I shall be
> verie busie
> this day. I
> may forget
> Thee but doe
> not Thou
> forget me.

We are busy with our own battles, you and I are. We are busy and occupied and running hard. God does not forget us. Some of us carry a load of disappointment and fear and grief and guilt. And the promise is that God does not forget us or abandon us or leave us alone, ever.

When we are called to be at the bedside of someone critically ill, fighting the last battle, facing the ultimate mystery, it is a good idea to have that simple prayer ready and to remember Psalm 139. I read it recently in that very situation.

> Where can I go from your spirit? . . .
> If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
> If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. . . .
> If I say, “Surely the darkness shall cover me,
> and the light around me become night,”
> even the darkness is not dark to you;
> the night is as bright as the day.

“That’s the best” she said.

The final battle—and the good news, as old as this ancient story— is God does not forget us.

“Behold, I am with you and will keep you and I will bring you home.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.